

## Counting begins in Syria elections

Aljazeera.net

Monday, April 23, 2007-05-03

Counting is under way following Syria's parliamentary elections but opposition activists say there is little chance of a surprise.

A total of 167 seats in the 250-seat assembly are reserved for the ruling National Progressive Front (NPF) coalition, led by the Baath party of Bashar al-Assad, the president.

Banned opposition groups had urged their supporters to boycott the polls.

State-run newspapers reported "massive participation" and "fierce competition" during Sunday's polling, but an election official in the capital, Damascus, told the AFP news agency on Monday that turnout had been low.

In Syria's second city of Aleppo, "candidates were disappointed by the low turnout," the independent *Al-Watan* newspaper reported

### 'Little enthusiasm'

The official SANA news agency said the vote had taken place "in total freedom and transparency", without giving turnout figures for the first day.

Journalists at the polling stations reported that there seemed to be little enthusiasm for the election in which nearly 12 million Syrians were eligible to vote.

"I don't really think anything is going to change, but I wanted to vote anyway," Inas Kokash said after casting his ballot on Monday.

"It's better to do something than to do nothing at all."

The Baath party itself is guaranteed 131 seats, 52 per cent of the total, in the parliament.

The other 83 seats are allocated to so-called independent candidates "close to the authorities," according to Hassan Abdel-Azim, a spokesman for the six banned, but largely tolerated, opposition parties which operate under the umbrella National Democratic Rally (NDR) organisation.

Abdel-Azim said it was "pointless to take part in an election whose results are known in advance ... The NPF will come out the winner," as it has done in all organised elections since 1973.

The election is the second since Bashar al-Assad took power after the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, in 2002.